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ABSTRACT

This paper explores what it calls the inadequacies of the concept of equal educational opportunity. An introductory section reviews the dominant interpretations of the principle of equal educational opportunity. Then it presents an extended review and analysis of the major criticisms of the principle, under any of its interpretations. A final section argues the principle of equal educational opportunity as necessary--but not sufficient--for the just distribution of educational benefits. The paper concludes that the principle in itself is a worthy ideal but by itself stands as a limited and counterproductive ideology. Finally, the paper considers other principles that might be added to the principle of equal educational opportunity in order to render it necessary and sufficient for a just distribution of educational benefits. (Author/LD)

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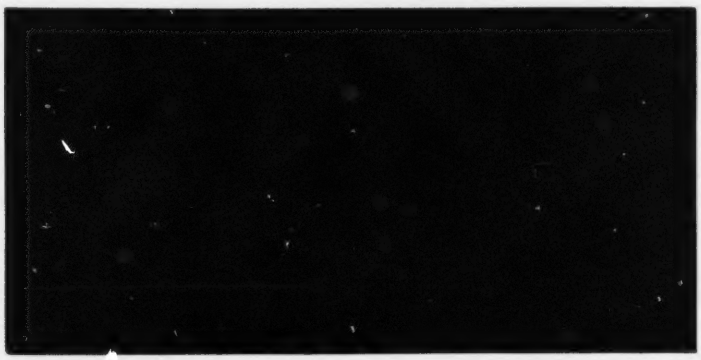

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EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: IDEAL OR IDEOLOGY?

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EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: IDEAL OR IDEOLOGY?

Abstract

In this paper we present the following thesis: the principle of equal educational opportunity is inadequate. It cannot guarantee a decent education for every person in society, it cannot guarantee a just distribution of educational and social outcomes, and it cannot provide a normative underpinning for all the things we want our educational institutions to do.

The paper comprises three parts: (1) an introductory section in which we review the dominant interpretations of the principle of equal educational opportunity; (2) an extended review and analysis of the major criticisms of the principle, under any of its interpretations; (3) a concluding argument for viewing the principle of equal educational opportunity as necessary, but not sufficient, for the just distribution of educational benefits.

Ideal or ideology? Our conclusion is that the principle in itself is a worthy ideal, but by itself it stands as a limited and counterproductive ideology. We end the paper by considering what other principle(s) might be added to the principle of equal educational opportunity in order to render it necessary and sufficient for a just distribution of educational benefits.

Acknowledgments

An earlier revision of this paper was read at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Eeucation Society, 1979, and has been published in the Proceedings of that conference.

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: IDEAL OR IDEOLOGY?

Introduction

In response to the criticism that the concept of "equal educational opportunity" is too vague, Max Rosenberg writes:

> The phrase 'equal educational opportunity' summarizes a good and proper dimension of democratic society. In our society the principle of equal educational opportunity should be as basic as the right to vote and freedom of speech. Equal educational opportunity will mean an end to all kinds of bias and discrimination in education, regardless of source or means or rationalization. It may be true that not all people can agree upon a precise definition of the phrase 'equal educational opportunity'. Yet it is a clearly recognized and widely approved concept and social objective. The phrase...is packed with meaning, value, validity, and authority.[1]

Unfortunately, Mr. Rosenberg has not deflected the accusation of vagueness; on the contrary, his statement is an archetype of the hopeful, but ambiguous, use of "equal educational opportunity" as an educational slogan. In fact, many authors have claimed that the principle of equal educational opportunity is no more than this: a slogan, a chimera, in short, an ideology.[2] In this paper, we address the accusation directly: is equal educational opportunity a worthy ideal, from which we deviate only be error or neglect, or is the principle mistaken in itself, at best misconceived and at worst a tool of ideological control and manipulation?

After a brief review of the principle and the most frequent interpretations of what it entails, we devote close attention to the six strongest cricitisms of equal educational opportunity. The force of these criticisms, we believe, is to show that while the principle in itself is a worthy ideal, it is inadequate by itself to guarantee a decent education to every person; in other words, the principle constitutes a necessary, but not sufficient, basis for educational policy. We conclude that it is reliance upon the principle as if it were sufficient which is usually criticized as ideological,

conservative, or unjust; the principle cannot bear alone the normative weight which persons like Mr. Rosenberg wish to place upon it.

A Summary of Interpretations

By "equal educational opportunity" we mean an "equal opportunity for education".[3] Phrased this way, the principle can be understood as a distributive principle, concerned with providing access to education. The use of "equal" in the phrase is potentially confusing, since it is sometimes used to mean "fair" and not, literally, "the same".[4] An "equal" (we would prefer to say "equitable") opportunity is, first of all, an opportunity for education and, second, an opportunity which is the same as for those persons who are relevantly the same, and fair, or appropriate, relative to those who are relevantly different, under some definition of "relevance". The meaning of "opportunity" is especially important; in a paper read at the national meeting of The Philosophy of Education Society three years ago, Ralph Page called our attention to the "willing" requirement of an opportunity.[5] That is, an essential feature of an opportunity is that it can be ignored, or passed up; it is, we believe, a consequence of this view that equality of results cannot be the sole criterion of when opportunities are equal. To use a phrase coined by Robert Ennis, one evaluates equal educational opportunities from the standpoint of "prospective retrospection".[6] That is, one seeks to provide opportunities for education, through the design of rules of access and compensations, in such a way that, prospectively, one will be able to say, retrospectively, that equal opportunities obtained. In this respect, the principle of equal educational opportunity is a procedural, and not results-oriented, principle.

There are three dominant interpretations of what an equal educational opportunity entails: following common usage, we label these formalism, actualism, and equal results. Formalism uses the "equal" in "equal opportunity" literally; an equal educational opportunity exists when the conditions of access to education, for example, rules of admission, are the same for each person. Second, the formalist interpretation tends to place greater emphasis on characteristics of merit in the determination of relevant standards for distributing opportunities. Third, the formalist interpretation, in judging when an opportunity exists, tends to place a greater emphasis on the ability of persons to "make their own opportunities" through the exertion of effort; formalism places correspondingly less emphasis on the importance of making compensatory treatments available as part of the provision of an equal educational opportunity.

Actualism seeks to go beyond formal equality of opportunity by considering what barriers might actually restrict access. Actualism emphasizes the fact that "having an opportunity to do y" often requires that a person had a previous "opportunity to do x"; for example, it is not fair, say actualists, to subject everyone to the same rules of admission for school if they have not all had the benefit of earlier opportunities to prepare them for such admission requirements. First, actualists tend to place a greater emphasis on compensations, in consideration of need,[7] where persons have not had such previous opportunities. Second, actualists tend to interpret the "equal" in "equal opportunity" to mean fitting or fair[8] opportunities, where alternative routes of access are designed with the actual difference between persons in mind. Third, actualists, while considering merit

characteristics, place less emphasis on the ability of persons to "make their own opportunities", and more emphasis on the responsibility of institutions, like education, to provide compensations that will make the exercising of opportunities more likely.

As noted earlier, both formalism and actualism are procedural views; the provision of equal educational opportunities consists in the establishment of rules, compensations, and alternatives which have certain expectable results, whether or not persons in fact avail themselves of those opportunities. Actualists may take it as a failure of compensations and alternatives when persons do not take advantage of them, but insofar as persons were making their own choices this is not a failure to provide equal opportunities.[9]

Since James Coleman's landmark study of equal educational opportunity,[10] a third interpretation has gained currency; according to this view, opportunities are equal only when results are equal. What is meant by "equal results" varies in different versions of this interpretation: some authors argue that "equal results" means, literally, the same results; others argue for equal progress from the relatively different starting points of persons; others desire the common attainment of some minimal level of achievement, however much some persons may go beyond it; most recently, some have argued that "equal results" means proportionate results, where the distribution of results shows proportionate representation of each significant group in society at each level of achievement.[11]

Whatever the merits of these egalitarian goals, particularly in reference to education, we believe that these are not interpretations of "equal educational opportunity" at all, nor can it be guaranteed that the provision

of equal educational opportunities will achieve any of these goals. Because it is an essential feature of an opportunity that it can be ignored or passed up, the eventual choices of persons can never be held as the sole criterion of whether or not an opportunity obtained. Equal educational opportunity is a procedural principle in which the expectable outcomes of certain provisions are the criteria of evaluation. A results-oriented interpretation may require certain policies which, in the attempt to equalize outcomes, might seriously contravene the rights of some persons, as in a case where students are "held back" despite their abilities. Furthermore, results-oriented interpretations carry compensation to a point where even choice and effort are "compensated for", as the factors which might prevent persons from taking opportunities are gradually chipped away--but at this point one is no longer discussing opportunities at all.

In summary, it is important to keep in mind the common features of both formalism and actualism, features which are essential to the principle under any interpretation. First, the principle of equal educational opportunity is concerned with the provision of access to education in an equal and fair manner (although different interpretations may emphasize either equality or fairness). Second, the principle distributes opportunities for education, and not educational results (that is, equality of opportunity for education is not identical with equality in education). Third, the principle of equal opportunity can be viewed as a compromise between presumed rights of equality and liberty, in that something is equalized between persons (namely, opportunities) without contravening the liberty of persons to determine their own choices. Fourth, it is the expectable outcomes of opportunities which makes opportunities equal or fair. Finally, the willing requirement

of opportunity limits the range of human traits and abilities which can be compensated for, if one is still to speak of "opportunities". In turning to the criticisms of equal educational opportunity, we urge the reader to keep in mind that these have been raised against the principle under either the formalist and actualist interpretations (since the equal results interpretation is really not a view of equal opportunity at all).

Criticisms

(1) The principle of equal educational opportunity tolerates a range of inegalitarian outcomes which do not seem consistent with common beliefs of what education can and should achieve. Major empirical studies by Coleman,[12] Jencks,[13] and Bowles and Gintis[14] have documented persistent inequalities of outcome despite dozens of major policies and programs instituted in the name of "equal educational opportunity".

In a sense, this is criticizing a fish for not being a bird; true, the principle of equal educational opportunity cannot guarantee equal educational outcomes, but it does preserve rights of free choice where policies which demand equal results would not. Although there are good reasons for desiring a more equal range of educational outcomes, it is not within the power of the principle of equal educational opportunity to insure this goal, in theory or in practice.

(2) "Correspondence theory"[15] criticizes the principle of equal educational opportunity for focussing too much attention on schools or other educational institutions as the site of reform, when in fact reform must begin in the society at large, especially within the economic spheres of income distribution and employment opportunities, before educational reform

will even be meaningful. According to this view, equal educational opportunity is an example of "nonreformist reform",[16] that is, an attempt at reform which does not alter the fundamental inequalities of society, an attempt which is at best ill-conceived and futile, and at worst a cynical ploy designed to perpetuate and legitimate unequal educational outcomes.

It has been well-established that "non-school factors" have a tremendous effect on educational opportunities and achievement;[17] in fact, the actualist interpretation of the principle takes account of this effect in planning compensations and alternative routes of access. But the criticism posed by correspondence theory is more radical than just a reminder of non-school educational factors; it demands changing these non-school factors, not just compensating for them.[18] The principle of equal educational opportunity, however, provides no basis for such change.

(3) The principle of equal opportunity for education is a conservative principle, because it does not call into question the quality of experience for which an opportunity is provided:

> Equality of opportunity will be worse than useless if the style of life to which it gives access is itself undesirable. [19]

This point has been made in a different way by Robert Ennis, who argues that disputes over the principle often rely upon different conceptions of what an "education" should be.[20] By focussing attention on how to provide equal opportunities for education, the principle accepts the goal as worthwhile; but if, as one author notes, schools have become "standardized, bureaucratic, characterized by extrinsic motivation, uniformity, and authoritarianism",[21] perhaps one should ask whether one ought to provide equal

opportunities to attend them. However, the principle itself would not lead one to question the educational status quo.

(4) The principle has been criticized for being overly meritocratic, in that it provides access to a meritocratic "ladder" of achievement without questioning the hierarchical nature of that ladder.[22] Like the third criticism, this view argues that the principle takes the nature of the educational experience for granted. This criticism misses the mark, however, when it claims that equal opportunities are distributed solely by merit, since the actualist interpretation, as noted earlier, considers need as well in the provision of compensatory options.

(5) Many authors have criticized the principle of equal educational opportunity for being overly individualistic and competitive,[23] claiming that it really stands for an "equality of opportunism",[24] that is, an "equal right to become unequal by competing against one's fellows".[25] We consider this an accurate assessment, although some persons would not consider it a criticism at all: "Truly effective competition strengthens rather than weakens that which deserves to survive."[26]

The most frequent response to this criticism, and to the fourth as well, is that the principle of equal educational opportunity is meritocratic, individualistic, and competitive only because we live in a liberal/capitalist society which is characterized by values of meritocracy, individualism, and competition, and that these are not essential features of the principle.[27] What may seem conservative in one context (e.g., a competitive meritocracy) might be extremely progressive in another context (e.g., a more deeply racist and sexist society).[28] At one time, indeed, the idea of providing equal educational opportunities for all persons was a radical notion! If it is

a criticism of the principle to say that it enshrines the status quo, according to this response, that is a criticism of the status quo, and not of the principle itself.

This response, however, does not deflect the crucial point; in fact, it concedes that point: the principle of equal educational opportunity is conservative. It is certainly an improvement to have a principle which bases the distribution of opportunities for education on relevant, rather than irrelevant, characteristics. But the determination of "relevance" is only partly empirical, and is largely evaluative, relative to a social context and a framework of beliefs and values which can vary widely.[29] One can certainly question whether the principle of equal educational opportunity alone can undermine the biases and prejudices of any given social order; on the contrary, often the characteristics of "relevance" can be defined in such a way that the provision of "equal opportunities" simply perpetuates and legitimates whatever biased outcomes may be desired.

(6) The principle of equal educational opportunity "blames the victim"[30] for failure by focussing undue attention on individual choice and effort, rather than on the responsibility of institutions to remove those barriers of hopelessness and perceived futility which make such decisions less likely. The bias of the principle towards meritocracy, competition, and individualism has profound and bitter consequences for the self-respect and self-esteem of those persons who fail.[31]

Equal Educational Opportunity: Ideal or Ideology?

Our review of these criticisms has, we hope, made the positive and negative aspects of the principle of equal educational opportunity more

clear. On the positive side, it preserves certain rights of liberty and free choice; it determines the distribution of opportunities for education on the basis of relevant, rather than irrelevant, characteristics; and it supports policies which will expectably equalize educational outcomes. On the negative side, the principle does not lead one to question the goals of education; it is a meritocratic, individualistic, and competitive principle; it cannot guarantee a more equal distribution of educational outcomes; and it is conservative and indeterminate[32] with regard to a broad range of social and educational outcomes. In short, given different determinations of "relevance,"[33] given alternative conceptions of "education",[34] and given other social goals or principles,[35] the principle of equal educational opportunity could support nearly any kind of educational policy.

In light of these criticisms, we conclude that the principle of equal educational opportunity is inadequate. In itself, it represents a worthy educational ideal, but it is insufficient, by itself, to guarantee a decent education to every person in society, to guarantee a just distribution of educational outcomes, or to provide a normative basis for all the things we want education to do. It is reliance on the principle as if it <u>were</u> sufficient that has been characterized as <u>ideological</u>.[36]

By "ideology" we mean "that synthesis of ideas and representations designed to state an ideal and to motivate action. It may be true in some of its parts, but it is a gross oversimplification..."[37] By calling reliance upon the principle of equal educational opportunity ideological, we mean that it is "true in part", but is <u>a</u> "gross oversimplification"; while it states an ideal" and "motivates action", the principle is inadequate by itself to guide educational policy.

Alternatives

If the principle of equal educational opportunity is inadequate by itself, what other principles must be added to it? In the remainder of this paper, we review several possibilities which outline a general direction or strategy for making the principle sufficient as well as necessary.

John Rawls acknowledged the inadequacy of the principle of "fair equality of opportunity" in his book A Theory of Justice; it must be supplemented by the Difference Principle, which stipulates that any distribution, as for education, must work to the "greatest benefit of the least advantaged in society".[38] Rawls states that the Difference Principle is characterized by a spirit of "fraternity", that is, "equality of social esteem...of civic friendship and social solidarity."[39] In short, it is a principle of altruism, which provides a normative basis for constraining the range of social outcomes which the principle of equal opportunity, alone, would find acceptable.

There are other characterizations of this kind of principle: one author calls for a spirit of "collectivism";[40] another for a feeling of caring, termed "caritas", which cannot be reduced to a formal principle;[41] Bernard Williams argues that more basic than the principle of equal opportunity is an "equal respect" for persons,[42] or what Brian Crittenden calls a concern for the "same overall level of good" for each person.[43] What these varied suggestions share is an attempt to articulate the sort of benign principle which will balance the indeterminacy of the principle of equal educational opportunity, which will hold it accountable to the effects of educational policies on the happiness and life-chances of persons. If the principle of equal educational opportunity is conservative, meritocratic, individualistic, and competitive, that may be because we live in a society that shares those values, rather

than because these are essential features of the principle itself; but it is an essential feature of the principle itself that it does not call into question such values, or their consequences for the feelings, aspirations, and opportunity choices of persons.

Some additional principles are necessary in order to constrain the range of outcomes which the principle of equal educational opportunity would, by itself, tolerate; they are necessary in order to guide the determination of what is a "good" education; they are necessary as a context of social values within which determinations of "relevance", "equality", and "fairness" must occur; finally, they are necessary to prevent the biases or prejudices of any particular society holding total sway over the implementation of the principle of equal educational opportunity.

In summary, we have argued that the principle of equal educational opportunity is a necessary, but not sufficient, basis for educational policy; more is needed to insure a just distribution of education, and a decent education, for each person in society. We agree that the principle is in itself a worthy ideal, but at the same time we note that its use as a slogan, as if it could, by itself, provide a normative basis for all that we want our educational institutions to do, is ideological. That is, it is an oversimplification and a chimera to say to the disenfranchized: "you had your opportunities and you wasted them; now your fate is entirely your own fault."[44] What we have called for is a genuine spirit of collectivism:

> "...a value orientation and mode of conduct that emphasizes social consciousness, concern for others, group solidarity, and moral commitment[45]

We believe that a principle of collectivism can be spelled out more fully in terms of presumed human rights; at the same time, we acknowledge that the widespread adoption of such a principle is unlikely to occur in a society characterized by liberal/capitalist values, such as our own. Nevertheless, the evidence of the failure of the principle of equal educational opportunity, in theory and in practice, is so compelling that if we are to preserve the principle as a worthy ideal, we must acknowledge the extent to which it exists as a limited and counterproductive ideology.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Max Rosenberg, "Proposed: An Equal Opportunity Amendment to the U.S. Constitution", Phi Delta Kappan, v.55 n.7. p.467.

[2] See:

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America (New York: Basic Books, 1976), ch. 4.

C.A.R. Crosland, The Future of Socialism (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), ch. 8.

Edward P. Morgan, Inequality in Classroom Learning (New York: Praeger, 1977), ch. 1.

John Schaar, "Equality of Opportunity and Beyond", in Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., Nomos IX: Equality (New York, Atherton Press, 1967).

[3] We have developed this view further in a longer paper,"Equal Opportunity: An Analysis" (available from the Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, Stanford University).

[4] See: B. Paul Komisar and Jerrold R. Coombs, "The Concept of Equality in Education", Studies in Philosophy and Education, v.3 n.3, pp.223-244.

[5] Ralph Page,"Opportunity and its Willing Requirement", Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society, 1976, pp. 296-305 and T.D. Campbell, "Equality of Opportunity", Proc. of the Aristotlean Society, 1974, p.54.

[6] Robert H. Ennis, "Equality of Educational Opportunity", Educational Theory, v.26 n.1, p.14.

[7] See, for example: William Blackstone, "Human Rights, Equality, and Education", Educational Theory, v.19 n.3, pp.291-292.

[8] Komisar and Coombs, op cit.

[9] Daniel Bell,"On Meritocracy and Equality", in Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey, eds., Power and Ideology in Education (Oxford University Press: New York, 1977), p.609.

[10] James Coleman, Equality of Educational Opportunity, Summary Report (U.S. Office of Education, 1966).

[11] See, for example, Onora Nell, "How do we know when opportunities are equal?", in Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartofsky, Women and Philosophy (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1976).

[12] Coleman, op cit.

[13] Christopher Jencks et al.,Inequality (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

14 Bowles and Gintis, op cit.

15 Ibid., ch.5 and passim. See also Michael Carter, "Correspondence and Contradiction" in Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin, The Limits of Educational Reform (New York: David McKay, 1976).

16 Herbert Gintis, "A Radical Critique of Ivan Illich", Harvard Educational Review, v. 42 n.1, p.93.

17 See, for example: Alec Clegg, "How 'Equal' is 'Opportunity'?", in Maurice Kogan and Margaret Pope, The Challenge of Educational Change (Great Britain: NFER Publishing, 1972).

18 Bowles and Gintis, op cit, ch.11, and Samuel Bowles, "Towards Equality of Educational Opportunity", Harvard Educational Review, v.38 n.1, p.95.

19 Brian Crittenden, Education and Social Ideals, (Longman Canada Limited, 1973), p. 207.

20 Ennis, op cit, pp. 7,8.

21 Morgan, op cit, p.11.

22 Morgan, Schaar, Crosland, and Bowles and Gintis all make this claim. See also: Michael Young, The Rise of the Meritocracy (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958).

23 Ibid.

24 Brian Lord suggested this phrase to us; it is quite clever and we had never heard it before.

25 Schaar, op cit, p.230.

26 Kenneth Clark, "Alternative Public School Systems", Harvard Educational Review, v.38 n.1, p.111.

27 Donald R. Tunnell, "Equal Opportunity Revisited" (unpublished paper, University of Illinois) pp.3,4.

28 Crittenden, op cit, pp.204,205.

29 William Blackstone, "The Principle of Equality and Educational Opportunity", Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society, 1965, pp.69,70.

30 See: William Ryan, Blaming the Victim (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

[31] See: Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) offers a moving account of the human consequences of success and failure.

[32] Gregory S, Kavka, "Equality in Education", in John E. McDermott,ed., Indeterminacy in Education (Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing, 1976).

[33] Blackstone, op cit.

[34] Ennis, op cit, pp.7,8.

[35] Myron Lieberman, "Equality of Educational Opportunity", in B.O. Smith and Robert H. Ennis, Language and Concepts in Education (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1961), p.140.

[36] A perfectly unambiguous use of this term would require a longer review of the concept of ideology and its role in various social theories; we wish to emphasize that an "ideology" is usually considered to be false or misleading, and we rely on that connotation here.

[37] Michael B. Katz, The Irony of Early School Reform (Boston: Beacon Press)p.14.

[38] John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 83-90.

[39] Ibid., p.105.

[40] Elizabeth Cagan, "Individualism, Collectivism, and Radical School Reform", Harvard Educational Review, v.48 n.2.

[41] Louis Arnaud Reid, "Equality and Inequality", British Journal of Educational Studies, v.6 n.1, p.61.

[42] Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality" in Joel Feinberg, Moral Concepts (Oxford University Press, 1969) p.171.

[43] Crittenden, op cit, p.201.

[44] For example, see Michael Lewis's account of the individualization of success and failure: The Culture of Inequality (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978).

[45] Cagan, op cit, p.228.